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## Francis L. Cooper, Spruce Hill Photographer

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Jay Ruby

## Introduction

American photography experienced rapid and intense change between 1890 and 1910. Dry glass-plate negatives, flexible roll film, hand-held cameras with simplified operating mechanisms, prepackaged chemicals, and platinum printing papers became readily available. Two major shifts in photographic practice occurred during this period: the public recognition of fine-art photography and the emergence of snapshotting.

In some ways, both were a reaction against the domination of the field by professionals. As technology was simplified, people became interested in taking pictures for themselves. Some wanted family portraits and a record of life around them; they became snapshotters. Others desired an aesthetic recreation and became avocational artistic photographers.

Some amateur artists formed photographic societies and camera clubs. Popular magazines of the day extolled the virtues of the amateur and at the same time decried the restrictions placed upon the art of photography by commercial demands (Black 1887:152).

The Photographic Salons at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1898–1901) played a central role in the public acknowledgment of photography as a respectable art form (Panzer 1982; Homer 1984). "Amateurs" such as Alfred Stieglitz used the first salon to demonstrate the importance of the medium. By the final salon, a split had occurred between conservative members of the sponsoring organization, the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, and a group that called itself the Photo-Secessionists.

The amateur photographer, popularly portrayed as a symbol of aesthetic freedom, was now the enemy of the Photo-Secessionists. The "old school" photographers in Philadelphia, their "dilettante" followers, and the hobbyist snapshotter, were regarded as impediments to the development of artistic photography.

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Recent scholarship suggests that the conflict between the "new" school of Photo-Secessionists and the "old" school of Philadelphia naturalistic photographers centered around power and control of the salons (Panzer 1982; Aronson 1984:21). Ironically, the naturalistic style of the old school photographers came back into vogue almost as rapidly as it fell out of fashion: "... the work of these unfashionable photographers now provides an essential link between the representational photographs of the 1870's and the sharp-edged, purely photographic style which arose after the Armory Show" (Panzer 1982:22).

During this period, many photographers apparently unknown to later scholars produced artistic photographs that were seen by people who never attended a salon or participated in any other way in the art world of the famous photographers. These amateurs, if discussed at all in the literature, are portrayed as "naive" or folk artists who unwittingly produced "masterpieces"—the Grandma Moses of the Brownie!<sup>1</sup> Their work for the most part has been regarded as unworthy of serious study.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is not a polemic against the dominant art paradigm in the history of photography. Rather, it is an examination from the perspective of cultural history of the life and work of an amateur Pennsylvania photographer, Francis L. Cooper.<sup>3</sup>

Cooper practiced photography in the 1890s and early 1900s in Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania. He was a witness to and participant in one of the important revolutions in photography. His life demonstrates the ways in which shifts in photographic practice affect society.

## A Biographical Sketch

Francis L. Cooper, son of a career naval officer, was born in Philadelphia in 1874. His family had been in the import-export and railroad businesses prior to the Civil War. He spent his childhood in a middle-class rowhouse near a trolley line that took his father to work at League Island naval base. Cooper's immediate family all died before he was fourteen years old. He lived with his father's relatives in various parts of the city and in suburban Narberth until he moved in 1901 to Spruce Hill Township, Juniata County, Pa., where he spent the next forty-three years.

Cooper entered the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1892, and for the next eight years he studied medicine. In 1896 Cooper began visiting the Charles Milliken farm in Pleasant View, Pa. (approximately 150 miles northwest of Philadelphia) to hunt, fish, photograph, bicycle through the countryside, and enjoy the pleasures of rural life. It was a chance to experience the "good" life—something that



was impossible without leaving the "Ruhr of America," as Philadelphia was called (Burt and Davies 1982:471). Cooper's retreat to the countryside was a commonplace experience for many middle-class urbanites who wished to live out the fantasy of what Schmitt (1969) calls the "Acadian Myth."

Love of the natural world and its related pleasures inspired Cooper to return again and again to the Milliken farm. During his visits, Cooper took photographs of the Millikens (Figure 1), scenes of rural life (Figure 2), and landscapes of the surrounding Tuscarora Valley (Figure 3).

Cooper's attraction to the Milliken farm and its environs was not confined to the scenery. He courted Gertrude Crawford, Mrs. Milliken's cousin, the daughter of a local physician. They took bicycle trips on the backcountry roads where Francis would photograph (see Figure 12). A "wheeling" excursion into the countryside to capture a landscape or a scene from a farmer's life was a dominant reason for many city dwellers' interest in photography.

During the next four years, Cooper divided his time between Philadelphia and the Milliken farm. In the city he took family snapshots, documented the various rooms in which he lived (Figure 4), and produced records of events like a fire at Eighth and Arch Streets (Figure 5). He took pictures of his medical school friends and their work at St. Agnes Hospital (Figure 6). He also made self-portraits (Figure 7) and scenes of city life (Figure 8).

Cooper's involvement in Juniata County became so strong that he eventually left city life forever to live among nature and the rural folk. In 1900 he married Gertrude Crawford. His decision set him apart from the majority of his social class who believed "that the ideal life is that which combines something of the social and intellectual advantages and physical comforts of the city with the inspiration and peaceful joys of the country" (Schmitt 1969:4).

Cooper never finished medical school and consequently did not practice medicine. By 1901, about the time of the birth of his first child, Cooper moved to a farm in Spruce Hill (not far from the Milliken farm). He became a country squire and was employed in a number of part-time jobs: justice of the peace, tax collector, clerk at public auctions, storekeeper, clerk at a nearby steel company, draft registrar during World War I, wallpaper hanger, and occasional professional photographer.

Four interests dominated Cooper's life: the sporting life, reading, photography, and music. The values Cooper acquired growing up in a comfortable middle-class world placed a high priority on these avocational interests, assigning them as much importance as the practical matter of earning a living.

According to his obituary, he was one of the best-read men in Juniata County and maintained an extensive library—the novels of Horatio Alger and Alexander Dumas and nonfiction works about Napoleon. He also had a collection of popular art—prints purchased at the Wanamaker store in Philadelphia (e.g., "Masterpieces of the French Salon of John Wanamaker's") and Sunday Supplement lithographs. Cooper owned the *Victrola Book of Operas* and a collection of Sousa marches and would treat his family to a concert of recorded music after the evening meal.

Cooper was a competitive shooter through his adult life. In fact, guns were the longest lasting of his pastimes. He took many pictures of himself (Figure 9) and others with guns (Figure 10). Most photos of Cooper show him as some sort of sportsman (Figures 11 and 12). His studies of birds and fish (Figure 13) are excellent examples of the way in which he combined his involvement in the sporting life with his interest in photography as artistic expression (a point to be discussed in some detail below). A December 9, 1899, article from the *Narberth Local News* entitled, "GUNNING AND PHOTOGRAPHY. Mr. Francis L. Cooper is successful at both," nicely sums up a point of view that Cooper shared with many people: that competitive shooting and photography were both worthwhile avocational pursuits.

Mr. Francis L. Cooper, one of the crack shots of the University of Pennsylvania Gun Club, is not a stranger to Narberth. He has not only been a resident of the borough, but he still makes weekly trips to visit relatives. Mr. Cooper has just returned from a gunning trip to Juniata County, where several days were spent in the exciting sport. He had considerable success in filling his game bags having individually shot one wild turkey weighing nearly twelve pounds; 19 quail, 1 rough grouse, 8 rabbits and 6 squirrels. One of his pictures took a prize in the recent photographic contest of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. He also figured as an exhibitor in the Wanamaker display. His fine pictures in the latter exhibition attracted the attention of the United States Commissioners to the coming Paris Exposition, and Howard Rogers, Director of Education and Social Economy, has just addressed a communication to Mr. Cooper, requesting that he send to the Commission [to be exhibited in the special American Photographic Display in the Paris Exposition] two of his best pictures—"Pusher on the Horseshoe" and "The Blacksmith Shop." There [*sic*] two triumphs of the camera had won universal admiration from the visitors to the Wanamaker contest.



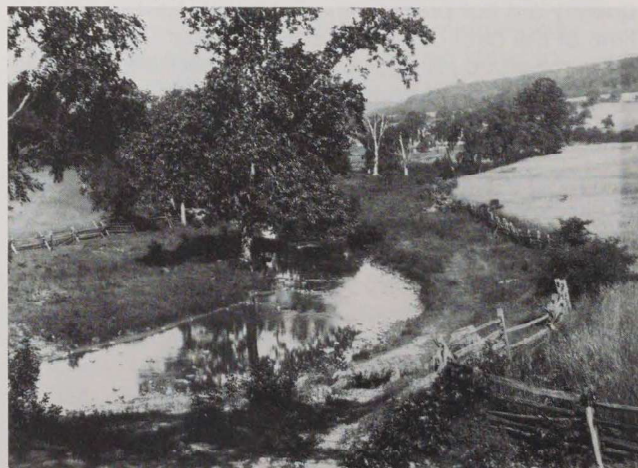


**Figure 1** Charlie and Lil (Milliken) in stand in grove. Summer, 1898.

◀ **Figure 2** Untitled. Two men sawing lumber.



**Figure 3** Near the Mouth of Milliken's Run. Tenth prize, 1899 Philadelphia Inquirer Contest. Also Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 739.







**Figure 5** *Spring 1900. Fire at 8th and Arch.*

◀ **Figure 4** *Untitled. Interior of Cooper's room in Philadelphia.*

**Figure 6** *Untitled. St. Agnes Hospital.*







**Figure 7** Cooper 1622 (South Broad Street, Philadelphia). Self-portrait.

When and why Cooper took up photography is unclear. He could have learned the rudiments in school since it was common to teach the principles of photography in physics and chemistry courses. Unlike many amateurs, Cooper did not join local organizations such as the Columbia Photographic Society (located in North Philadelphia near where he grew up) or the venerable Photographic Society of Philadelphia, nor did he apparently have much contact with other photographers.

The lack of evidence of Cooper's involvement with the photographic worlds of his time makes it impossible to know where he learned the photographic conventions he utilized. His photographs strongly suggest that he did have a knowledge of artistic photography. His collection of lithographs and prints clearly indicates a general interest in the visual arts.

While there is some evidence of a beginner's technical incompetence and a preference for the informal snapshot, his early photographs display a range of interests remarkably similar to his later work, regardless of the sophistication of his equipment. It is clear that Cooper's upbringing and education created a cultural template that provided him with a sense of appropri-

**Figure 8** Untitled. Buggy in snow on Broad Street.







Figure 9 Untitled. Francis Cooper.

ate subject matter and form. Landscapes, self-portraits, genre, and still lifes are all to be found among his first photographs.

Between 1895 and 1898 Cooper owned or had access to several roll-film cameras: an 1895 Pocket Kodak, a Folding Pocket Kodak, a Kodak Bullet, and a Kodak Bullseye Special No. 2. They are among the first flexible-film box cameras produced for the snapshooter. Cooper, like many others, used these simple devices to produce artistic images.

Cooper also owned a Tele Photo Cycle Poco—a 5-by-7-inch glass-plate view camera intended for the serious amateur. "Cycle" in the camera's name refers to the fact that it was promoted as a "wheeling companion"—a camera to be taken along on bicycle trips. Cooper did just that. Francis and Gertrude took the Poco on their outings to the countryside (Figure 12).

Cooper developed his own plates and roll film and printed his own pictures. He used Eastman and Stanley plate negatives, Eastman roll film, Hydrochinon developer, and Eastman Solio, Azo, and platinum papers. He had a darkroom at his farm in Spruce Hill and in his cousin Nell's home in Narberth.

For one year (1899–1900) Cooper entered the world of competitions and exhibitions. His photographs were displayed in three events—the 1899 John Wanamaker Exhibition of Photographs by Amateurs, the 1899 *Philadelphia Inquirer* Photographic Contest, and the 1900 Paris Exposition—events undoubtedly created as a result of the excitement generated by the Philadelphia Photographic Salons.

The Photographic Society of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts sponsored the first of four salons in October 1898. They were to be of great importance to the future of photography (Homer 1984:3).

In 1899 the *Philadelphia Inquirer* started a column devoted to photography in its Sunday halftone section where salon photographs by Alfred Stieglitz, F. Holland Day, Clarence White, and Gertrude Käsebier appeared. The newspaper was responsible for thousands of people—perhaps more than ever before in the history of the medium—seeing fine-art photogra-



Figure 10 Untitled. Gertrude Crawford Cooper in Milliken's stand with gun.

phy for the first time. It was an exciting time for anyone interested in artistic photography.

The advent of halftone reproductions of photographs enabled popular magazines to publish what their editors called "artistic" photographs. The images tended toward "Girls in Greek robes, sentimental genre scenes, and portraits of beautiful women" (Panzer 1982:13). The publication of photographs like F. Holland Day's *An Ethiopian Chief* must have come as somewhat of a shock to the *Inquirer's* readership.

During the 1899 salon, the *Inquirer* ran a contest for amateur and professional photographers (probably the first for the newspaper). Hundreds of people entered. The paper published the names and samples of the contestants' work in its Sunday photographic column. The contest judges were Harrison Morris, director of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; William F. Rau, professional photographer, officer of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, and organizer of the salons; and Otis F. Wood of the *Inquirer* staff.

The contest attracted a wide variety of talent. Edward Curtis, well-known photographer of the native American, won first prize. Francis Cooper won tenth prize for a landscape of the Tuscarora Valley (Figure 3); he received a letter of congratulations, a check for \$5.00, and his name and winning photograph in the Sunday halftone section. Cooper was able to have the same picture exhibited publicly.

While the *Inquirer* was running its photo contest and the second salon was in progress, twelve photographs by Cooper were selected for the 1899 John Wanamaker Exhibition of Photographs by Amateurs, including the *Inquirer* contest winner. (Figure 15 shows the entry form. Figures 3, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21 were among the images exhibited.) Cooper's photographs constitute the only evidence of the exhibition, which was neither reviewed nor mentioned by Philadelphia newspapers or photographic journals.

It is possible that the purpose of the exhibition was to obtain photographs for a United States exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. At least in Cooper's case, this was the result. On November 24, 1899, Cooper received a form letter from Howard Rodgers, director of education and social economy for the United States Commission, which stated,



I desire to invite you to contribute for use at the Paris Exposition a copy of the following mentioned photographs displayed by you at the Wanamaker Exhibit in Philadelphia:

732 Pusher on Horseshoe

734 Blacksmith

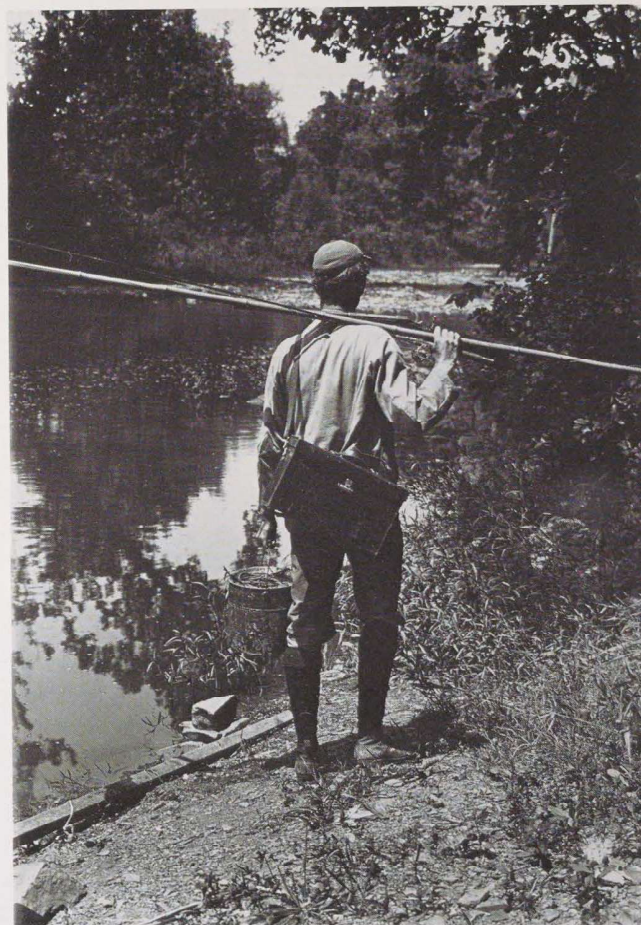
In this department there will be installed a large gallery of photographs showing American scenes, more particularly industrial views. The installation of these views will be very artistic and inasmuch as they will be displayed in a permanent building in the center of the Exposition grounds at Paris it is expected that this gallery will attract attention. . . .

Cooper must have sent the photographs because on December 12, 1899, Rodgers acknowledged receipt of the images and asked if they could be enlarged and whether Cooper had any "other views of an industrial character?" The exhibition was apparently in the section mounted by the Department of Education and Social Economy and not in the hall where "artistic" photography was displayed (Figures 20 and 21).

Cooper took his mounted photographs off the wall of his Philadelphia home around 1901 and never displayed them again. His involvement in artistic photography ended except for an occasional use of certain aesthetic conventions in the photographs he took for other people in Juniata County. From 1901 until 1920, Cooper took family photos and portraits, school pictures, and photographs of family reunions, which were commissioned and purchased. The images often contain poses unlike Cooper's other work and reveal the props of the professional portrait photographer, such as a painted backdrop (Figure 14). By 1920 Cooper stopped taking photographs.

### An Analysis of the Photographs

A description of Cooper's photographs and a contextualization of the work within a larger historical tradition follow. It is impossible to determine quantitatively whether the surviving photographs are representative of Cooper's total output as a photographer.<sup>4</sup> However, there is sufficient consistency of style to warrant generalization. Moreover, comparison with images produced by some well-known artistic photographers suggests that he was aware of the photographic conventions of his time.



**Figure 11** Untitled. Fisherman with camera case—probably Francis Cooper.

### I. Snapshots

Cooper's snapshots are as unremarkable as any image of this type (Figures 1 and 6). The people either are posed casually or have assumed the stiff formality of a studio portrait. There is no evidence that much attention was paid to the lighting or the background. The subject is usually in the center of the frame. The image is uniformly a medium shot taken at eye level.

Some images are sufficiently well composed to confound the label "snapshot." For example, Cooper photographed the interiors of the houses in which he lived in Philadelphia (Figure 4). Are they simply records of his life or serious attempts to explore the problems of light and shadow or both? I have chosen to err on the side of caution and assume that Cooper's snapshots sometimes contain elements similar to those found in his more deliberately composed photographs.

It is possible and useful to distinguish the snapshots from the artistic photographs. However much they may resemble each other on formal grounds, they can be separated on the basis of intended use.





**Figure 12** Untitled. Francis Cooper with gun, fishing rod, and camera.

None of Cooper's snapshots is signed. Most are unmounted. None was entered in photographic competitions. The images that can be called artistic do have these attributes. The problem of making an organized description of materials produced with an eclectic template is never readily solved. The consistency often seen in studies of other photographers may be nothing more than an artifact of researchers' needs to "create" an order.

In looking at Cooper's snaps, one is struck by the fact that an agenda was quickly established among these first snapshotters for the types of people, places, objects, and events to be photographed and how to photograph them. The "look" of the photograph has varied little since the form was invented. Professionals did not take photographs like these, nor did amateurs prior to the invention of the simple box camera. It is difficult, therefore, to explain the immediate and widespread "look" of the snapshot that appears to have transcended time, place, and culture.

## II. Artistic Images

Labeling a photograph a snapshot is often an uncomplicated task, in spite of the confusion caused when snapshot conventions are used deliberately by art photographers such as Diane Arbus or Lee Friedlander. Describing a particular photograph as "art" is more difficult. People have been arguing about the status of photography as art since its invention. Discussions of whether it is folk, vernacular, naïve, popular, or fine art plague the literature.

It is not germane to this study to determine whether or not Cooper's photographs are "good art" or "important images." The art paradigm is not one given much credence or support in this study. Moreover, those determinations or perhaps pronouncements are often artifacts of the currently popular aesthetic or art revisionist history and have little value in increasing our understanding of the cultural history of photography.

Cooper intended some photographs to be regarded as art because (1) they were printed on platinum paper, mounted, and signed; (2) they resemble the compositional rules employed by artistic photog-





**Figure 13** Untitled still life.

raphers; (3) they were titled by Cooper; and (4) they were entered in contests and competitions. In short, the photographs contain a set of formal characteristics regarded at the turn of the century as belonging to artistic photographs.

Cooper produced sharply focused, unretouched photographs, usually unenlarged. The 5-by-7-inch images, made with the Poco camera, were printed full frame and slightly trimmed on the edges. The Bullseye prints were sometimes cropped from their square format of  $3\frac{1}{2}$  by  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches into a rectangular shape with the height to width ratio resembling that of the Poco prints. Cooper also used precut mats for some unsigned prints, which provided limited opportunities to "recompose."

*Pusher on Horseshoe* (Figure 20)—a picture exhibited in the Wanamaker show and in Paris—is an exception, as it was both cropped and enlarged. There is a piece of tape on the original negative, probably placed there by Cooper to indicate where the image was to be cropped when the darkroom technician made the enlargement. It is possible that Cooper made the enlargement for the Paris Exhibition (see above).

Cooper made "straight" photographs. He used

none of the techniques to make the image look "painterly," e.g., gum-bichromate printing. The underlying premise in straight photography is that the observable world contains enough beauty and order for the photographer to transform nature into art by observing the correct compositional rules. The photographer's task is to strive to understand the varying qualities of light and their effect upon nature and upon the negative and to become sensitive to forms in nature.

Cooper did not invent this point of view. It is found in the work of a number of nineteenth-century photographers. The most widely known pronouncement is Peter Henry Emerson's 1886 speech entitled, "Photography—A Pictorial Art." As Panzer (1982:10) points out, "Emerson asserted that a 'straight' photographic print could express emotion, and thus deserved the status of fine art. . . . He celebrated the artistic value of naturalistic landscapes and commonplace scenes, bringing an elaborate reading of the entire history of Western Art to his argument for the artistic value of plain, unretouched photographs." Emerson's view was at odds with the one that regarded photographic art as photographs that looked like composite, painterly images, such as H. P. Robinson's *Fading Away*.

This naturalistic aesthetic had been practiced in Philadelphia prior to Emerson's speech and continued long after Emerson modified his original position. Cooper's landscapes and scenes of rural life resemble "a distinctive regional style—especially in landscape" found in the works of Philadelphia photographers like Robert Redfield, Henry Troth, and Charles Mitchell (Homer 1984; Panzer 1982).

These photographers believed that art should be produced in nature with a view camera on a tripod. While one could easily argue, from a modern point of view, that the technology and the site of one's work are not important elements, it should be remembered that these photographers were trying to separate themselves from the "hack" studio professionals on the one hand and the hobbyist snapshooters with their newly invented "detective" cameras on the other.

The need to use a particular kind of camera in order to make photographic art and the more fundamental proscriptions about subject matter and form were challenged by a number of people in the 1890s. Stieglitz's use of a hand-held camera in 1893 is regarded by some historians as being a revolutionary act (Newhall 1964:103). *Winter, Fifth Avenue* and *The Terminal* were considered by Stieglitz, immodestly, as "... the beginning of a new era. Call it a new vision, if you wish" (quoted in Welling 1978:354). Whether or not Stieglitz was the first to make art with a hand-held camera is not important. What is important is that by 1896, when Cooper became involved with photography, a range of possibilities was available. Cooper took advantage of many of them.



## Ila. Scenes from Nature

Cooper's images taken from nature and rural life are concentrated around Charles Milliken's farm and the nearby Tuscarora Creek. His interest in the photographic possibilities offered by this relatively small geographic area seems limitless. While they portray actual places—"views" with titles like *Near the Mouth of Milliken's Run* (Figure 3)—it would be a mistake to assume that the photographs were produced solely to record the natural beauties of the locale.

Cooper's interest in the rural life of Juniata County as a place to recreate himself was derived from the "back to nature movement," which Schmitt (1969) suggests was a response to the industrialization of cities like Philadelphia. The appreciation and rendering of the landscape was an important manifestation of that attitude.

Cooper's landscape photographs posed certain aesthetic problems. Two forms of evidence support this contention: (1) the Philadelphia suburban countryside in the landscape photograph *Mill Creek Near*



Figure 14 Portrait of Albert Moyer.

*Narberth* (Figure 18) is indistinguishable from Pleasant View (compare Figure 18 with Figure 16); and (2) several landscapes were taken at the same place, but based upon the foliage, amount of water in the creek, and other physical evidence, they were produced at different times of the year. For example, Figure 16—*Tuscarora Creek*—is a Wanamaker entry taken with the Bullseye camera. Two views taken with the 5-by-7-inch Poco camera that are virtually identical to Figure 16 except for the amount of water in the creek also exist. In other words, Cooper produced variations of the same theme because he was interested in trying to solve certain compositional problems. He was not acting like a tourist interested in local scenery; he was behaving like an artist using nature to create a landscape.

Three elements dominate Cooper's landscapes: the Tuscarora Creek with its ability to reflect light and shapes, forms created by the trees, and the Tuscarora Mountains. Cooper explored ways in which these elements could be combined and organized. One photograph—*Near the Mouth of Milliken's Run* (Figure 3)—a Wanamaker entry and the *Inquirer* contest prize winner, contains all three elements. It is a typification of Cooper's approach to landscape.

The creek, bordered by a split-rail fence, dominates the foreground with reflections of light and the shapes of the trees. Its sinuous path, broken by the textured verticals of the trees, leads to the midground and eventually to a vanishing point. The trees bordering the no-longer-visible creek disappear into the foothills of the mountains, barely visible in the background. The sky is without cloud or other feature (an artifact of the kind of film available to Cooper rather than some conscious decision on his part to eliminate the clouds).

There are similarities between this photograph and landscapes produced by Philadelphia "naturalistic" photographers (Panzer 1982). Charles L. Mitchell's untitled landscape of a stream and woods (Homer 1984:18) is the clearest example. Mitchell, a member of the Photographic Society of Philadelphia, was one of the chief proponents of the old school of artistic photography and a severe critic of the "fuzzography" of the pictorialists. In addition, Robert Redfield's *Brook in Springtime* (1897), Frank Streeper's *Quietude*, 1897, and Henry Troth's *Morning Mists* (ca. 1900) all share the same aesthetic principles as Cooper's images (see Homer 1984 for illustrations of these examples).

Cooper's landscapes can be understood as variations of the composition displayed in Figure 3. For example, in Figure 16, the creek is wider, the trees less prominent, and the mountains that form the background less distinct. Sometimes mountains are replaced by a forest, causing the perspective to



(Label for Back of Pictures for Exhibition)

**The John Wanamaker Exhibition  
of Photographs by Amateurs**

NOVEMBER, 1899

Title of Picture Clover  
 Location Pleasant View Pa  
 Camera used Kee Photo Cycle Poco 5x7  
 Lens used Rochester Symmetrical  
 Plate used Stanley  
 Exposure 1/25  
 Developed with Hydrochinon  
 Paper used Stanley  
 Are clouds natural? No  
 Was color screen used? No  
 Exhibitor's Name Francis Cooper  
 Address 1810 S Broad St Phila

---

No. VII 3365 Group A

Figure 15 Wanamaker Exhibition entry form.



Figure 16 Tuscarora Creek. Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 730.

become foreshortened. The emphasis in these images is upon the creek and its capacity to reflect light in different ways (Figures 16 and 18) and to reflect shapes (Figure 22)—a subject that dominates these landscapes. In other instances, the verticals created by the trees serve as framing devices, sometimes balanced and in other cases asymmetrical (Figure 23). The trees emphasize fore- and midground.

The landscapes were made in spring or summer and usually show no animal or human life. The winter scenes reveal similar compositional concerns: snow replaces water as a source of reflected light, and barren trees offer some additional possibilities (Figure 24).

Cooper transformed the Juniata County countryside into an idyllic, restful place of beauty. It was his escape from the city. Once Cooper moved to Spruce Hill, he stopped producing landscapes. He became a part of the world he admired as an outsider and was no longer interested in transforming it into an aesthetic object.

### IIb. Scenes from Everyday Life in the Country

In addition to photographing the countryside, Cooper produced genre scenes of Juniata County. Scenes from everyday life of the "common folk" was a popular form among artistic photographers. Emerson regarded it as equal in importance to landscapes. At the time Cooper took these pictures, genre was at the height of its popularity. However, because the form can easily become an anecdotal, romantic cliché, some photographers were beginning to disavow it.

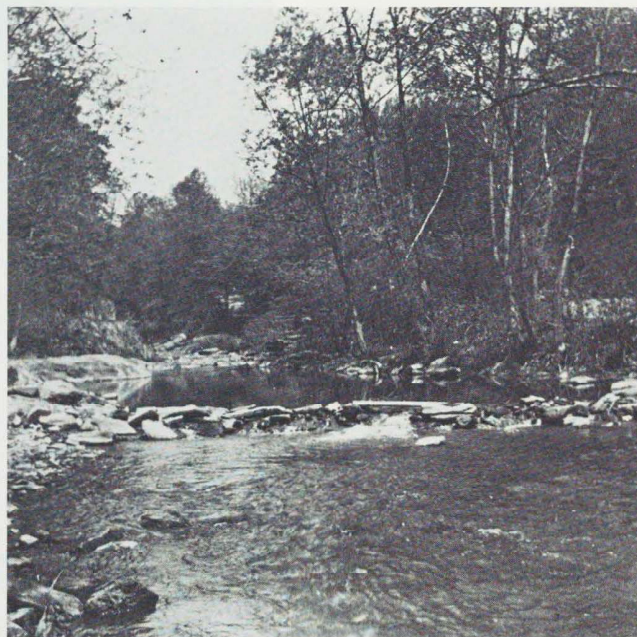
At Pleasant View, Cooper experienced a life-style very different from the one he knew growing up in Philadelphia. His photographs of rural life show an intense interest in this world. He recorded the Millikens at work (Figure 2) and the rural life around Pleasant View (Figures 17, 21, and 24). Some images look like the snaps city tourists might take in the country, others like *The Blacksmith* (Figure 21) were composed as a genre photograph. The original intention of others is unclear.

In Figure 17, a Wanamaker entry, *Calves Snow of Nov. '98*, the title particularizes the images into a record of an actual event and therefore takes it out of the category of anonymous events—one of the traditional attributes of genre. On the other hand, the animals in this photograph as well as the one in Figure 24 dominate the frame and appear to be more signifi-





**Figure 17** *Sheep Snow Storm*, Nov. 27.98. Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 733.



**Figure 18** *Mill Creek Near Narberth*. Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 737.

cant than other elements. Similarities can be found between Cooper's pastoral images and those of Philadelphia photographer Mary Vaux (see *Sheep Pasture* [Homer 1984]).

Cooper also composed scenes of the sporting life. His *Squirrel Hunters* (Figure 19), a Wanamaker entry, demonstrates the way Cooper combined his interest in the art of photography with hunting. The title *Squirrel Hunters* fulfills one of the requirements of a genre picture, that it be an anonymous depiction (Washburn 1962, 6:82). However, at the bottom of the entry form, Cooper wrote "38 killed first day of season 1897," thus making the image more a record of an actual event than a genre photograph.

Cooper liked to have his own picture taken as the sportsman (Figure 12). Most of these images are attempts to portray Cooper as an actual person. However, he did use himself as a model for a genre picture of a fisherman (Figure 11).

### IIc. Cityscapes and Street Scenes

While rural life was Cooper's primary subject, he did take some pictures of Philadelphia. The examples described and discussed here show that Cooper was aware of the new school of artistic photography that turned its hand-held cameras on the life of the city and the industrial world. However, these images apparently were not held in the same esteem as his country pictures. Only one—*Pusher on Horseshoe* (Figure 20)—was submitted to a competition.

It is not germane to the focus of this paper to argue whether or not Stieglitz was the originator of this school of photography. A comparison of images by Stieglitz and Cooper will be made here simply because the Stieglitz pictures are commonly used to illustrate this period in photographic history and are therefore well known.

Between 1898 and 1900, Cooper took a number of Bullseye photographs of life in the Philadelphia streets. A man shoveling snow, probably on Broad Street near Cooper's home (Figure 25), is reminiscent of Stieglitz's *The Ragpicker*, 1893. A buggy in the snow on Broad Street (Figure 8) and a fire at Eighth and Arch Streets (Figure 5) follow the same aesthetic as Stieglitz's famous *Winter, Fifth Avenue*, 1893 and *The Terminal*, 1893 and the less well-known *Snow* by William G. Ayres (a photograph that appeared in the 1901 Philadelphia Salon) (Homer 1984). Finally,



there is an obvious similarity between *Pusher on Horseshoe*, 1898 (Figure 20) and Stieglitz's *The Hand of Man*, 1902.

There is no evidence that Cooper ever saw the particular photographs mentioned above or, for that matter, any Stieglitz photographs. Rather than labor over the impossible and not particularly interesting question of direct influence, it is sufficient to say that in five years (from 1893 to 1898), Stieglitz's "revolutionary act" of making art with a hand-held camera in a snowstorm on the city streets had become widely diffused and probably common practice among photographers concerned with artistic photographs.

### IId. Still Life

Cooper also photographed the results of his hunting and fishing trips. Some were informal records of a kill—casually taken snapshots of fish or squirrels lined up in a row (Figure 26). The negative envelope lists the kind of weapon used, the date, and the variety of fish or animal. In other words, the image is a record of the shoot—the sportsman recording his success.

Other pictures are still lifes of fish or birds he or his friends killed. These pictures follow the conventions of this pictorial form. One has only to compare Figure 13 to F. C. Curry's 1885 photograph *The Heron* (Newhall 1964:64) or to Jan Baptist Wennix's *The Dead Partridge* (Anon. 1984:125) to realize that Cooper was aware of the pictorial tradition and sought to emulate it.



**Figure 19** *Squirrel Hunters*. Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 738.



**Figure 20** *Pusher on Horseshoe*. Wanamaker Exhibition entry no. 732.

### Ile. Self-portraits and Portraits

Self-portraits have been undertaken by virtually every painter in the Western world in the last two hundred years. The problems facing a painter doing a self-portrait are parallel to those a painter doing a portrait encounters as well. A similar argument is difficult to make for photographic self-portraiture. To succeed, the artist has to be able to transform him- or herself into an aesthetic object that can then be manipulated. The technology of photography virtually prevents the photographer from having total control over all variables when attempting to photograph the self. Moreover, a basic difference exists between the media of painting and photography that at times makes the designation of self-portrait problematic. Unless one sees the shutter release in the hand of the photographer, it is reasonable to assume that someone else actually released the shutter, thereby at best making the designate "self-portrait" questionable.

There are a number of extant portraits of Cooper (Figures 7, 9, and 12 represent only a handful of the total) but only one in which you see the camera in his hand (Figure 7). Sometimes Cooper described a negative as "Cooper by Cooper" or simply "Self." It could be argued that if he took one self-portrait, chances are he took others, and, therefore, those images marked *Self* or *Cooper* should be considered self-portraits. In Cooper's case, the puzzle cannot be solved, and in the long run it is not important. The only point to be made here is that in their attempts to be regarded as artists, Cooper, like other amateurs, assumed the behavior of the painter.





**Figure 21** *Blacksmith.*  
Wanamaker Exhibition  
entry no. 734.

Cooper did not take many artistic portraits. His portrait of an unknown young woman (Figure 27) demonstrates some interest in the problem of portraying the human form with a single light source and neutral background (two characteristics that separate these pictures from those Cooper later took as a professional).

Photographers interested in demonstrating that their work was fine art had to overcome the association of photographic art with the clichéd work of studio photographers. Hence, portraiture was discredited in the 1860s and 1870s among serious amateurs as something to be avoided in order to have one's work taken seriously. While the portrait was more acceptable in the 1890s, it was still suspect. Cooper's attitude might have been influenced by the antipathy of other photographers.

### III. Professional Work

Cooper started taking photographs for money when he moved to Spruce Hill in 1901 about the time Joseph Replogle, a professional photographer from Walnut (a few miles from Cooper's farm), moved into a vacant studio in the county seat, Mifflintown. The area around Spruce Hill was left without the services of a local photographer. Cooper filled in with his 5-by-7-inch view camera.

When taking photographs for other people, Cooper fulfilled their expectations by following the conventions of the professional. He obtained painted and plain backdrops and a chair for the subject either to sit in or stand beside. Several small oriental rugs completed the illusion that the picture was being taken in a studio. Cooper took portraits of children, adults, families, groups—schools, family reunions, church groups—and houses. The majority are indistinguishable from the thousands of images produced at this time by itinerant and studio professionals (Figure 14).





**Figure 22** Untitled landscape.

Cooper's artistic sense of composition sometimes "intruded" and he produced pictures that employed the conventions of the artist. It is interesting to speculate about two images. In Figure 28, the people on the front porch appear to be a family, perhaps on the occasion of a reunion or anniversary. Since group photographs of school or church or family reunions were very much a part of the lives of these people, they knew how such pictures were supposed to look and how they should pose: in a row tightly packed together, expressionless, and all facing the same direction. Since they are not in the expected pose, one wonders just what the occasion was and what the people thought when they saw the photograph.

The three schoolgirls in Figure 29 are even more problematic. School photos at that time showed a class or entire school neatly lined up in rows with the teacher and someone holding a blackboard with the name of the school and the date. Individual portraits in the school yard were uncommon. The most striking aspect of this photograph is the pose. It exudes a sexuality uncharacteristic of both Cooper's other work



**Figure 23** Untitled landscape.



**Figure 24** Untitled landscape.

and other photographs taken at that time in Juniata County. It does not fit into any conventional category of photography known to these people. Knowledge of photographic as well as social conventions makes us wonder why Cooper posed them in such a provocative manner in the middle of the school yard. Most likely, we are seeing a pose constructed by the young ladies. While Cooper's other professional work often has a certain flair, none is as "out-of-place" as the schoolgirls.

Those people still alive in Juniata County who knew Francis Cooper's work as a photographer remember him taking school or church pictures or going to someone's farm to make a portrait. His interest and involvement in artistic photography was unknown, an activity confined to the time when he was a visitor from the city.





**Figure 25** Untitled. Man shoveling snow, probably in Philadelphia on Broad Street.

## Conclusions

This paper illuminates aspects of the social history of American photography by examining the work of one avocational photographer. The photographs have not been judged as aesthetic objects nor has their place in an "art" history of photography been evaluated. Francis Cooper's pictures are worth examining because they were produced when modern photographic practice was being created. Living in Philadelphia, Cooper was able to observe and to incorporate these changes into his photography.

Cooper was educated at a time when people from his social class were expected to know something about literature, music, and art—to cultivate good taste. It was assumed also that they would acquire a morally redeeming avocation. Writing, scientific experiments, field trips for botanical or zoological collecting, painting, or sketching had been considered for some time worthwhile pursuits for the soul and mind. In the 1890s, photography had just joined the ranks of socially acceptable aesthetic pleasures.

The using of the camera teaches the value of light and shade, discloses deep-hidden beauties of nature, as they are disclosed to none other than the poet and the painter, teaches new truths concerning the matchless beauties and intricacies of nature, aids to make gentler lives, germinates and develops and fosters and fixes stably a sensitive love for esthetics. (Harwood 1896:250)

Conditions were ripe for the flowering of avocational artistic photography. The industrialization of American cities produced a large number of affluent, educated people who needed meaningful recreational activities. They saw the camera as a way of exploring pictorial form. The development of photography as an aesthetic recreation for the middle classes and casual picture taking or "snapshooting" occurred at the same time. Both were possible because the industry provided the public with the means to produce its own images. Until the 1890s, anyone wishing to make a photograph had to invest a fair amount of money in the equipment and take the time to become familiar with enough chemistry and other arcane knowledge to produce an image. The costliness and complexity of the technology discouraged most people. Photography, therefore, was left to the professional and the occasional hardy amateur.

Cooper used some of the first roll-film cartridge box cameras, designed to be easy to use and relatively inexpensive. The Kodaks—like the Pocket and Folding Pocket and the various models of the Bullseye—became so popular between 1895 and 1900 that Eastman brought out the first Brownie in 1900, thus permanently altering our society's capacity to make and use images.

While he was a member of the first generation of snapshooters, Cooper's upbringing allowed him to see these simple box cameras as more than devices to preserve family events or displace professional portraitists. From the beginning, Cooper regarded photography as a means of artistic expression and as a fine art, and he therefore used it to produce landscapes, still lifes, and other compositions.

Artistic photography had only a brief history prior to 1900. It was, therefore, only logical to turn to the older and more-established pictorial tradition of painting as a model to emulate. Within a few years art photography changed. The Photo-Secessionists and those who followed Stieglitz's direction allied themselves with the avant-garde and modernist movements. They searched for their form and style within photography, dissociating themselves from the painterly tradition of the pictorialists. The avocational photographer and camera club member continued to espouse a pictorialist aesthetic but without understanding its historical origins. Genre photographs were produced but reduced to quaint and cute scenes of kittens and puppies in a barnyard. Landscapes became travel pictures. Eventually, avocational photographers be-





**Figure 26** *Two Fox, Two Grey, Two Pine Squirrels.*  
Sept. 6th '96.

**Figure 27** *Untitled portrait of a young woman.*



came dissociated from a fine art tradition and became hobbyist gadgeteers whose knowledge of the medium was confined to *Popular Photography*.

Cooper did not take sides in arguments between the old school and the new school photographers about which equipment was proper, nor was he concerned with controversies over the "proper" subject for photographic art or the "correct" assumptions about composition. He took pictures with box and view cameras, on and off a tripod. He was interested in the pastoralism of the naturalists who made landscapes and scenes from everyday life in the country. He also took images of city life—railroads, fire engines, workers shoveling snow on the city streets—that borrowed from pictorialist ideas. He took family snapshots and professional portraits with no apparent conflicts. He ignored the proscriptions various leaders attempted to place on the uses of technology, the types of subject, and the "correct" approach. He used cameras regardless of their assumed suitability and borrowed and mixed conventions. Cooper was not experimental or avant-garde; he merely lacked any real interest in being aesthetically consistent or ideologically correct. I suggest that photography is practiced in this pragmatic manner by most people, including those seriously interested in it as an art form. Photography as represented in standard art histories describes only a handful of practitioners.

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## Notes

- 1 For example, Andy Grundberg's review of Robert Bracklow's photographs in the January 8, 1984, issue of the *New York Times* was entitled, "Was This Unheralded Amateur New York's Atget?"
- 2 I have discussed this approach to the study of photography elsewhere (Ruby 1981).
- 3 The material for my study of Cooper came out of a larger study of the visual communication systems of Juniata County, Pennsylvania (Ruby 1982). Eventually, I would like to produce a book-length study of Cooper and organize an exhibition of his photographs.
- 4 The collection contains hundreds of glass-plate and nitrate negatives, hundreds of mounted and unmounted photos, a negative catalog, and ten albums.





**Figure 28** Untitled portrait of a family.

**Figure 29** Untitled portrait of three schoolgirls.



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